
Rioters Clash With Police in Southern Yemen

Ahmed Al-Haj, Associated Press —

SANAA, 2 April 2008 — Yemeni authorities ordered tanks deployed to the streets of southern region of the country to prevent further rioting yesterday by disaffected youths and retired military officers over unfulfilled promises to incorporate them into the army, officials and eyewitnesses said.

The deployment occurred after six demonstrators were “seriously injured” during early morning clashes with police, said the witnesses.

Over the past three days, security forces have arrested at least 120 former army officers and lawmakers believed to be leading the demonstrations in the country’s southern cities, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to talk to the media.

Tensions have long simmered between Yemen’s northerners, who dominate the government and the economy, and the southerners in this impoverished country of 22 million that was rent by a north-south civil war in 1994.

On Sunday, rioters set fire to at least two police stations, burned military vehicles and tried to storm the state-owned bank in the southern city of Dhalae, 220 kilometers south of the capital Sanaa, said the official, adding that at least nine demonstrators were injured.

Yesterday morning, riot police fired in the air to disperse demonstrators and roads were sealed by tanks and barricades, turning the southern cities into ghost towns, said witnesses.

Demonstrators responded by cutting the highway to the port city of Aden, the south’s regional capital, with armed men.

Last week, some 20,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Dhalae, in response to a call from the Retired Army Association of southern veterans demanding reforms and their return to the army.

The Yemeni Cabinet condemned the demonstrations yesterday, saying in a joint statement that they were marked by “sabotage, rioting and chaos” and “were aimed at undermining security, spreading chaos and creating dissension.”

“Firm procedures will be enacted against the perpetrators of these criminal acts,” the statement added, without providing specific details.

During yesterday’s Cabinet meeting, Yemen’s Interior Ministry filed a report saying the demonstrations offended innocent people and damaged private and public property.

North and South Yemen were united in 1990 under northern President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

In 1994, the south tried to secede and was defeated by the north in a civil war that lasted several months.

Officers and soldiers from the southern army fled into the mountainous hinterlands and into Saudi Arabia for years, returning only after the government issued an amnesty and promised to readmit them to the army — a promise the southerners say has not been kept.

Southerners also complain that they are kept out of government jobs — a main source of employment in the south — in favor of northerners brought in to fill the bureaucracy and security forces.